

Mediawatch

Sheep fever Bernard Dixon

“Send in the clones” (*Newsweek*), “Brave new world” (*Los Angeles Times*) and “Could we now raise the dead?” (*London Daily Mail*) were three of the headlines triggered by the announcement from the Roslin Institute in Edinburgh of a viable lamb derived from an adult mammary cell [1]. Perhaps encouraged by team leader Ian Wilmut’s explanation of the name given to Dolly (“We couldn’t think of a more impressive set than Dolly Parton’s”), the world’s press had a field day.

Yet it was for the most part a field day to applaud. From New Zealand to Finland, most journalists sought to purvey accurate information rather than striving for sensation. The technical feat was unusually well explained, and often placed in the context of previous Roslin Institute work on cloning from sheep embryos and even John Gurdon’s work with frogs 30 years ago.

Particularly notable were the many reports in which ideas headlined to attract readers’ attention were addressed in more sober fashion, and often repudiated, in the story below. “To make hundreds of human clones, you have to assume the acquiescence of hundreds of women eager to rent out their wombs for political or commercial profit, a scarcely credible notion,” wrote Robin McKie who broke the story in the *Observer* in London. “A clone of Saddam Hussein would not necessarily covet Kuwait,” the *Chicago Tribune* assured readers in an account of what genetic identity really means.

It was in Germany where the media voiced the strongest anxieties about the possible extension of the new technology beyond farm animals. “The cloning of human beings would fit precisely into Adolf Hitler’s world

view,” said the Berlin-based *Die Welt*. Multiple Hitlers also appeared on the cover of *Der Spiegel*.

One of the most striking aspects of British coverage, alongside journalistic reportage, was a prolific outpouring of opinion from newspaper columnists. Within hours of hearing the news from Edinburgh, they were holding forth on developmental biology when, on a different day, the topic would just as readily have been motor racing or politicians’ hairstyles.

“If we prefer the illusory control of cloning to the glorious gamble of life, we will be interfering with nature in a way far more arrogant and dangerous than ever before,” Libby Purves opined in *The Times*.

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Likewise Bryan Appleyard in the *Sunday Times*. “The lamb of Science has been sent among us to announce that all reproductive bets are off, that genetics, so long on the way, has finally arrived,” he wrote. “If the technique can be applied to humans — and there is absolutely no theoretical reason why not — and you have enough money, then genetically identical armies of you, your loved ones and your sports heroes would seem to be a new consumer option.”

Theologians and bioethicists were hardly more insightful. Speaking on BBC Television’s *Newsnight*, Donald Bruce, Director of the Church of Scotland’s Society, Religion and Science Project, argued that producing clones “like a production line of widgets, seems to lose something of the individual dignity of the animal.” Because “God’s creation” was diverse, cloning was bad. Asked about parthenogenesis in greenfly, he declined to comment.

Martin Marty, Lutheran minister and divinity professor at the University of Chicago, was more buoyant. Interviewed in the *Chicago*

Tribune, he indicated that a cloned human would be “just as much a child of God” as a non-cloned human. There was “something distinctive about human beings,” but “we’re hard-pressed to get at it.”

There is one remarkable thing about comments of this sort. They come not from busy scientists, quizzed off-the-cuff about some topic outside their field. They come from professionals who, day by day, are paid simply to ponder over the abiding issues of human existence and the dilemmas arising from the progress of science and technology. Yet, when these selfsame thinkers address new developments in biomedical science, they are all too likely to come up with either impotent agonizing or amiable waffle.

Indeed, the most striking aspect of Dolly’s arrival was the unpreparedness of so many well-placed individuals and bodies to cope with the issues which she raised. Thirty years after John Gurdon’s work, nineteen years after David Rorvick’s fraudulent book [2] purporting to describe actual human cloning, and following innumerable articles and studies, it took a young Finn Dorset lamb to catapult President Clinton into asking his National Bioethics Advisory Panel what it all meant. The presidents of France and of the European Commission were two of many other world leaders who followed Clinton in crying for help.

By comparison, the media (not to mention the science fiction world) had ventilated the issues thoroughly over the intervening years. Helped by the transparency of the Roslin Institute, they were relatively well prepared for Dolly’s immaculate conception.

References

1. Wilmut I, Schnieke AE, McWhir J, Kind AJ, Campbell KHS: Viable offspring from fetal and adult mammalian cells. *Nature* 1997, 385:810–813.
2. Rorvick DM: *In His Image*. London: Hamish Hamilton; 1978.

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